

UNDERSTANDING THE BERBERS

The Many Faces of a Nomadic People

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The story of the Berbers is complex, their association with the “Spanish” conquest of the Americas is often forgotten. Undoubtedly the blood of these nomadic peoples runs from North Africa to the Iberian Peninsula and to the far off reaches of our many Mission Trails.

The Berbers are widely considered the original peoples of North Africa. As a group they are linked more by language and culture than by common ancestry. They are an ancient nomadic peoples believed to have entered North Africa from the near east. Today, though, a challenge is being made to this historic account, as some scholars are claiming that the original Berbers were actually dark-skinned, and the ancestors of today’s people of the Sahel Region of Africa, a swath of land stretching through the Sahara from the Atlantic Ocean to the Red Sea, and touching the modern-day countries of Senegal, Mali, Niger, Chad, Algeria, Mauretania, and Sudan.

I recently spent two weeks exploring the history of the Berber-Arab conquest of Spain, and lived for several days with the modern-day Berbers of Morocco. I found both dark-skinned as well as green eyed, lighter skinned “Berbers”. The face of the Berber is not singular but plural – Berbers share some similar characteristics as well as some distinct features.

About the Author

David A. Bolton has spent the past 20 years studying and documenting many features of the vast Mission Trails of the Americas. He has produced four documentaries, including the first hour-long summary of the California missions, *Inside the California Missions*, as well as works on *North America’s Mission Trails*, *Junípero Serra: His Life, his Legacy and the Missions*, and *Inside Mission Santa Barbara*. He has filmed most of the missions of the Americas from the vast Jesuit chain in South America, to mission regions in the current U.S. Southwest and much of Mexico. He has focused the past ten years studying closely the former Jesuit missions of Sinaloa, Mexico and continues to investigate and uncover their importance on later mission expansion into Arizona (Sonora), New Mexico, and las Californias. He is the current president of CMSA and works fulltime as Executive Director and CEO of the California Missions Foundation – an organization dedicated to raising funds to preserve the Alta California missions and their related historical resources.



Figure 1 (above, left). A Berber in the Sahara Desert. A scene replicated for at least 5,000 years. Photo by David A. Bolton.



Figure 2. The many faces of Moroccan Berbers. Photos by David Bolton.

The Berbers are a diverse people – undoubtedly a mix of Sub-Saharan Africans, Europeans, and West Asians, according to published DNA studies conducted to uncover both male and female ancestry. Y chromosome DNA testing which reveals the male lineage, shows a Berber “marker” or common trait thought to have originated in North Africa more than 5,000 years ago. The parent to this marker is believed to have originated in East Africa. Further testing shows that this Berber “marker” commonly referred to as E-M81, is linked to North Africa as well as to Spain, Portugal and Sicily. It is also found throughout the Americas in many Hispanic males.

Female DNA of the Berbers, according to studies, reveals ancestry from near Asia, Europe and sub-Sahara Africa.



The Berbers have inhabited the vast lands of northern Africa since prehistoric times, roaming the deserts and sand dunes, surviving several invasions and continuing their language and culture today.

The Berbers call themselves the “free people”, *libertad* was a word used often while speaking Spanish during my recent trek through Morocco seeking to understand the Berbers, their history and way of life.

Generally speaking in Morocco today, the Berbers live in the open lands, the desert regions and the mountains. The major Moroccan cities -- Fes, Marrakesh, Rabat and Casablanca -- are predominately populated by Arabs and the modern day Moor – those with a mix of Arab and Berber blood. Berber villages dot the landscape of much of Morocco, to the south and to the east, from the desert to the mountains. Their villages have a distinct appearance. They contain simple structures made of clay and are built around the central mosque.



Figure 3 (above). Current Moroccan King Mohammed VI. His father was an Arab and his mother a Berber from the Atlas Mountain Region of Morocco.

Figure 4 (left). A Berber woman at the Medina in Fes, Morocco. Photo by David A. Bolton.

Figure 5 (below left). Modern day Berber flag.



Figure 6. The author with a Berber in Morocco.

Figure 7 (next page, top). A typical Berber village in the Atlas Mountains.

Figure 8 (next page, bottom). Possibly the most famous of the Berber villages, Ait Ben Haddou, is protected by UNESCO as a world heritage site. Photo by David A. Bolton.





Figure 9 (left) The author camel trekking deep into the Sahara Desert, and Figure 10 (below left) with a Berber in Moroccos's Atlas Mountains.

Multilingual, today's Berbers speak their native ancient Berber tongue (*Tamzight*), Arabic and French – a language the twentieth century French colonizers left in Morocco. Many Berbers also speak a variety of other languages helping them tremendously as they welcome a growing tourist trade to the isolated parts of Morocco – the Berber land.

Today, most Berbers follow Islam, but as the Berbers I met told me often, “our language first and religion second.” Keeping alive their culture is the number one priority for the modern-day Berbers.



THE INVASIONS

As original inhabitants of much of North Africa, the Berbers had lived peacefully throughout this land and the high mountains, even during invasions by Phoenicians (twelfth century B.C.E.), Romans (40 C.E.), Visigoths (fifth century) and again by Romans.

Christianity was introduced to the traditional pagan Berbers in the second century. Berbers also counted Jews among their ranks. This would all change though in the seventh century following the massive invasion of the Arabs. It was an invasion that would forever alter the lives of the Berbers in Morocco and elsewhere. It was an invasion that brought the new Islamic religion and a new civilization to the region.

Following the death of Mohammed in 632, the Arabs began a great western military expansion from the recently united Arabian Peninsula, crossing North Africa and eventually reaching Morocco and the Atlantic Ocean. The Berbers became Muslim.

Shortly thereafter, the Arabs and Berbers, now as a joint force, made their historic invasion into the Iberian Peninsula, first landing at and claiming the island of Gibraltar,² and then establishing the Islamic Al-Andalus territory in 711. The Moors, as this group of combined Arabs and Berbers would be called, dominated and then lingered around the Iberian Peninsula in some form or another for more than 700 years.

During these seven centuries, Islamic capitals would be set up in modern-day Spain first in Cordoba, then in Sevilla and finally in Granada. This all came to an end with the successful completion of La Reconquista, the Reconquest, under the rule of Ferdinand and Isabella in 1492.



Figure 11. The great Islamic Mosque of Córdoba, the Mezquita, is unique in that it replaced a Catholic Church built by Visigoths, only to see the Spanish after the Reconquista build a Catholic Cathedral around the historic Mosque arches. Photo by David A. Bolton.

Spain, once again Catholic and free of Moorish rule, would then set its sights on the Americas. But not before the Moors had left their mark on the Iberian Peninsula, from architecture to food, from vocabulary³ to a new mixture of bloodlines.¹

All of the above would soon make its way across the Atlantic, eventually to our Mission Trails, as Spain began its massive conquest of much of the Americas.



Figure 12. The Guadalquivir river in Sevilla – the gateway to the Americas. From this river many Spanish galleons left for the Americas. On these vessels were many Spanish, but also many mixed-blood Moors and Spanish. Spain’s melting pot would play a big role in the melting pot of the Americas.

Sevilla later received a royal monopoly on trade to the Americas and much of the wealth discovered by the Spanish from South to North America came back to Spain through Sevilla. This city would become one of the largest in all of Europe – thanks to its role controlling trade with America.

Endnotes

1. I made the Berber trek with Gonzalo Sarmiento Manjarrez, a native of Sinaloa, Mexico. His ancestors have been traced back to the earliest arrival of the "Spanish" into Sinaloa in the 1500's, not long after Cortez first arrived in Mexico. Throughout our Moroccan journey, at every step of the way, after seeing Berber after Berber, Gonzalo's frequent comment - he or she looks a lot like "one of my Culiacan cousins, aunts or uncles". Sinaloa was one of the first mission and presidio regions in the Americas. It was the launching pad for mission and presidio expansion into New Mexico, Arizona (Sonora), and the Californias.
2. Gibraltar was named after the conquering Berber Umayyad general Tariq ibn-Ziyad who led the initial invasion into the Iberian Peninsula. Gibr-al-Tar. It is a Spanish version of the Arabic phrase, Jabal Tariq – "mountain of Tariq".
3. Most words in the Spanish language beginning with "al" originated or are derived from Arabic: ie alfombra (carpet), almohada (pillow). There are roughly 376 words in the Spanish language that begin with 'al' that are derived from Arabic. Other words found along the Mission Trail, including adobe (dried clay brick), aduana (custom house), alcalde (mayor), also are derived from Arabic.



Figure 13. Sinaloa, Mexico native Gonzalo Sarmiento Manjarrez in Morocco.

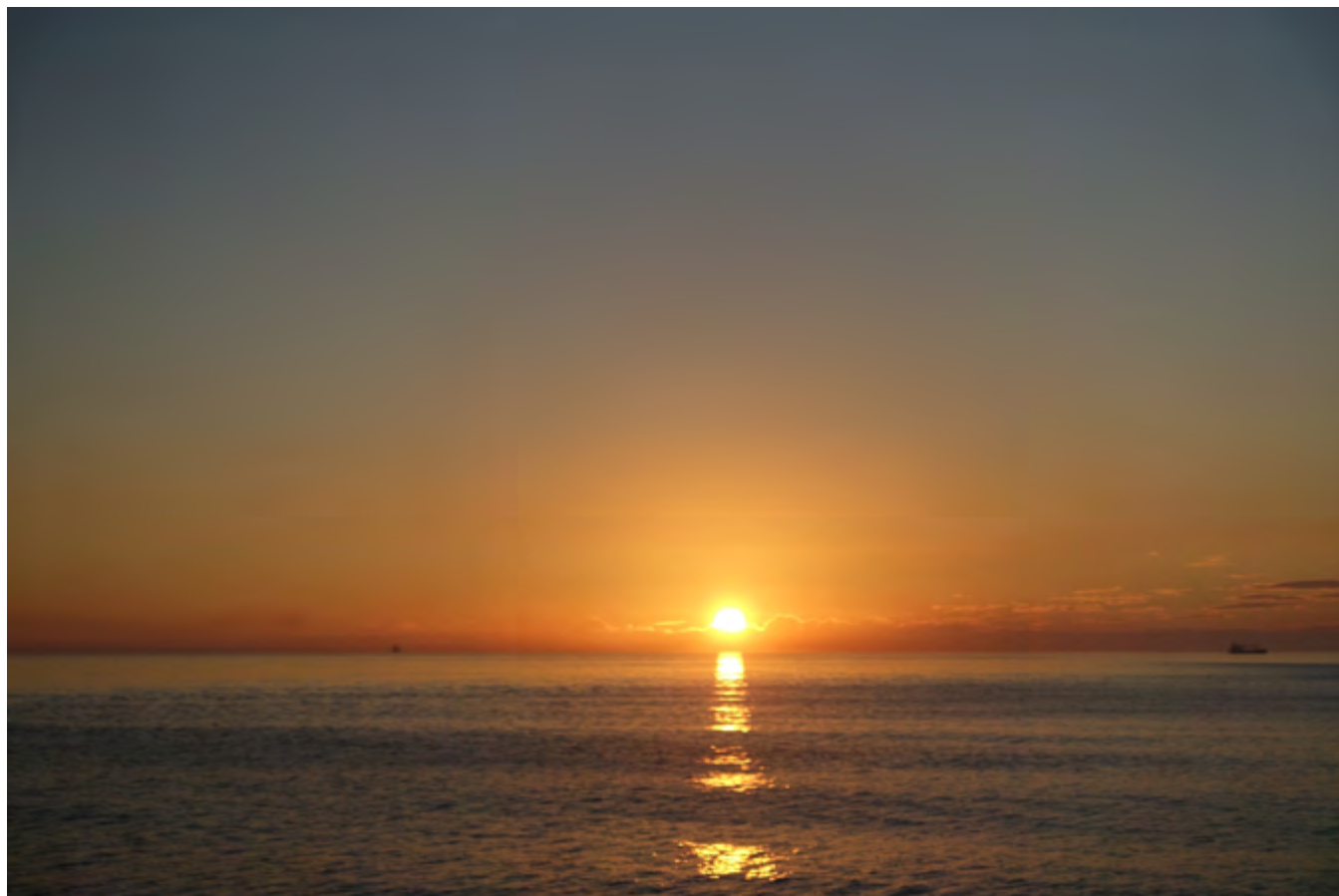


Figure 14. Sunset between Spain and Morocco. Photo by David A. Bolton.

Sources

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